Wood-engrav... to-day

Frank Weitenkampf

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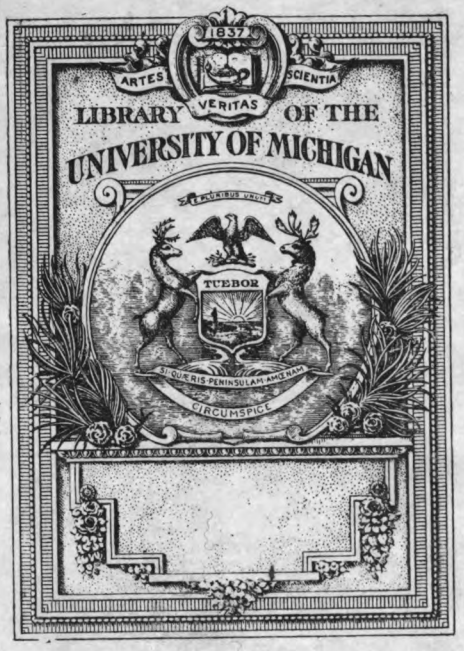

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Wood-Engraving To-Day

By
Frank Weitenkampf

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THE PRINT LOVER

Wood-Engraving by Alfred Prunaire, after Daumier
(The original is partly printed in colors)

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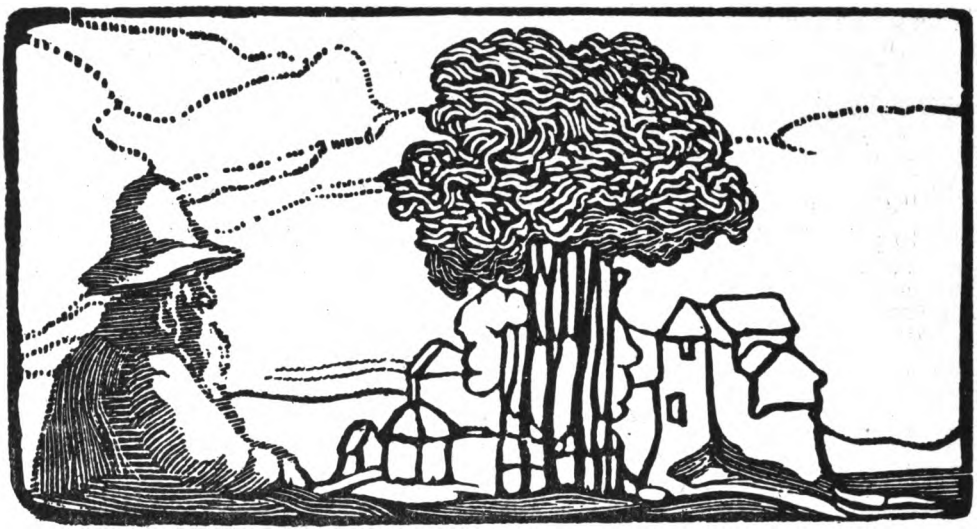

THE GOOD GREY POET
Designed and engraved on wood by Gordon Craig. From "The Page," 1899.

WOOD-ENGRAVING TO-DAY[1]

By Frank Weitenkampf

THE art of engraving on wood, as it was practiced in Europe and subsequently in this country, has held its own for five centuries. Not with uniform success. There were even times (in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries) when its low vitality made it appear moribund. From the beginning, it has been more or less an art for the people. The early block-books and type-printed books were illustrated with woodcuts, while separately issued cuts further served as a factor in civilization, bringing humanity from mediaevalism into our modern world. And from then on, to recent times, illustrated books in various fields of learning, as well as school books and work in *belles lettres,* were for the greater part decorated with wood-engravings.

When, with Thomas Bewick, near the end of the eighteenth century, there came a complete change in method, a period ensued which in its reproductions of paintings and other works of art finally culminated in the so-called "new school" in the United States. No greater contrast could be imagined than the woodcuts of the time of Dürer, cut with a knife on a plank (that is, with the

[1] The illustrations for these notes were made from engravings in the Print Room of the Library.

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grain), in exact facsimile of the original drawing in line, and these modern American engravings, engraved with the graver across the grain of the wood, with a devotion to tone that lost sight of the line *per se*.

In the old woodcuts the engraver treated the block as a white surface on which form and shadow were to be indicated in lines cut in relief, to be inked, and to print black. In the modern wood-engraving, the block is dealt with as a black surface (if an untouched block were inked it would print a solid

FROM THE HYPNEROTOMACHIA POLIPHILI
VENICE, ALDUS MANUTIUS, 1499

Cut in facsimile of a line drawing, on wood, along the grain, the lines being thrown into relief, in order to hold ink for printing, by cutting away the surface of the block around them.

BY THOMAS BEWICK

Engraved with a graver (burin) on wood, across the grain. This is largely "white line" work, the lines being incised so as to appear white, while the portions of the surface of the block left untouched hold the ink and print black.

black), into which lines are to be cut which, being incised (not in relief) and not catching the ink, will appear white in the print. Obviously, the proper number of white lines will reduce the solid black to the shade of gray desired.

With the advent of the photomechanical processes, wood-engraving appeared to pass. Very few of our American artists remained to carry on the traditions of the art in reproduction: Henry Wolf (recently deceased), Timothy Cole, and W. G. Watt. But, without going further into the question of the cause of the decay of wood-engraving, it may be noted that, true to its former record, the art has not died, and it is not apt to do so. It is practiced to-day, less as a reproductive art, more as a means of direct expression for the artist. That implies, of course, that the artist himself engraves on the block (just as he etches on the copper plate or draws on the lithographic stone), with-

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out the intervention of an engraver between him and his public. The result is what has been called "painter-engraving," in which the artist is represented by his own lines, and which is thus an "autographic art." It was inevitable that this should lead away from the method of the reproductive engraver who rendered the tones of a painting or wash-drawing by covering his block with fine work to produce tones. Economy of means, summariness of impression are now sought after, rather than detailed completeness of effect.

ORIGINAL WOODCUT BY F. VALLOTTON

In Europe the use of the wood-block by artists, though not as widespread — I had almost said common — as the use of copper and etching-needle, is noteworthy. In France we encounter the magisterial vigor and swing of Lepère, the cleverly placed blacks of Vallotton, the work of Henri Rivière and Paul Colin. Lucien Pissarro and E. Verpilleux are more or less identified with England, where William Strang, Sleigh, Ricketts, Gordon Craig, Sturge Moore and Nicholson express themselves with a temperament national, yet widely varied in its individual notes. In Germany and Austria, Emil Orlik, Walter Klemm, Laage, Karl Moll, Fanto, and numerous others are proving that the possibilities of vigorous simplicity offered by the block have perhaps a special appeal to the Teutonic mind. A considerable proportion of this work is printed in color, printed in flat tints as are the Japanese prints, but in most cases showing no other strong Japanese influence.

In our own land, the earliest "painter-engravings" came from the very men who had helped to create that "golden age" of reproductive engraving in America. Kingsley, Closson, Wolf, Bernström, French, engraved their own conceptions on wood, — with the completeness of effect called for by the

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WOOD-ENGRAVING, IN COLOR, BY EMIL ORLIK

Showing a Japanese artist designing for the wood-cutters. It is one of a series of three, the other two representing the wood-cutter and the printer

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works in tone which they usually translated. But a small number of younger artists took up engraving on wood in a spirit that induced simplicity in rendition of form, with either a recurrence to the straight line-facsimile work of old (say, by George W. Plank), perhaps even with a certain archaism (as in the work of Allen Lewis), or an indication of tone by means of flat tints. The last may be in color, as in some of the work of Rudolph Ruzicka, who uses light tints, or Ethel Mars, or Bertha Lum, or in the "Ipswich Prints" of Arthur W. Dow, whose application of the Japanese method "to Western expression and use" won enthusiastic praise from the late E. F. Fenollosa. More Japanese in feeling are the colored woodcuts of B. J. Olssen-Nordfeldt, and yet more so those of Miss Helen Hyde. Howard McCormick engraved a few blocks with a rugged insistence on pictorial completeness, using the graver with noteworthy freedom of touch. W. F. Hopson, Lewis, Hugh M. Eaton, and Plank, have utilized the medium in the production of book-plates, while James Britton in three or four posters showed what could be done with the tools of the old-time poster-carver. Recent exhibitions have disclosed other devotees — not *all* yet "arrived" nor *all* entirely balanced — of the wood-block, and of its near relative, the linoleum-print.

BOOK-PLATE BY A. ALLEN LEWIS

In the best work produced here we find two important elements: seriousness of purpose and an evident understanding of the medium, of its possibilities and its limits. This matter of saying your say within the proper limits, with the proper restraint ("freedom within the law," Miss Rittenhouse puts it, with regard to poetry), cannot be insisted on too often. It implies a basic law in all art.

Finally, it is not without significance that some of these American artists have had opportunity, — Ruzicka in his series of engravings of "New York," with "prose impressions of the City" by Walter Prichard Eaton, published by

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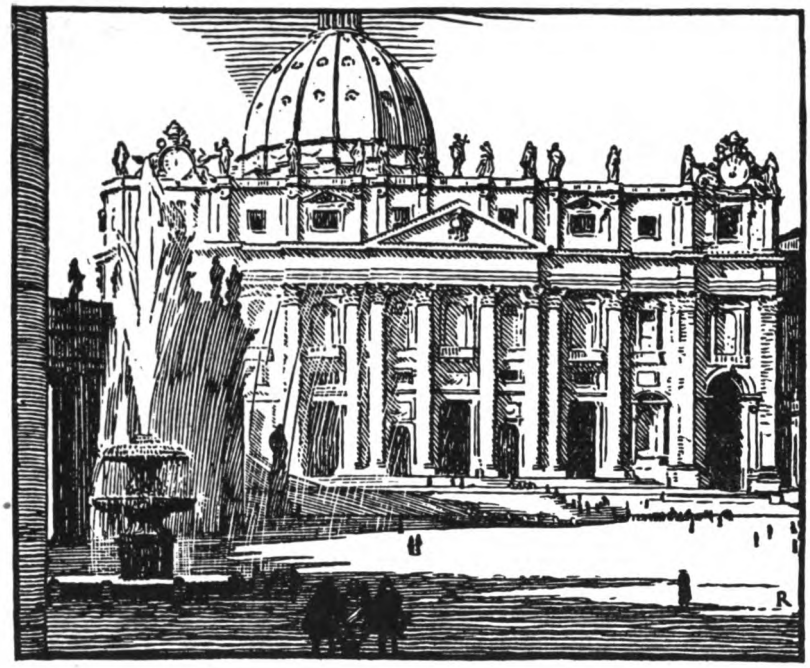

ST. PETER'S

"FOUNTAINS are among the most successful monuments of the late Renaissance," and those which stand on either side of the great Square of St. Peter's show that Symonds's statement should be enlarged so as to include the century which followed that period. Mr. John Evelyn, the accomplished English traveller of the seventeenth century, saw the fountain of Paul V soon after its completion and describes it in his diary as the "goodliest I ever saw." Since his day the twin fountains both of Trafalgar Square and of the Place de la Concorde have been erected, but Evelyn could still give the superlative praise to the great Roman model. Although the two fountains in the Square of St. Peter's

DRAWN AND ENGRAVED ON WOOD BY RUDOLPH RUZICKA

A page from "Fountains of Papal Rome," by Mrs. Charles Mac Veagh, published by Scribner, in 1915. It shows the possibility of emphasizing the harmony between the line of type-printing and illustrations in line

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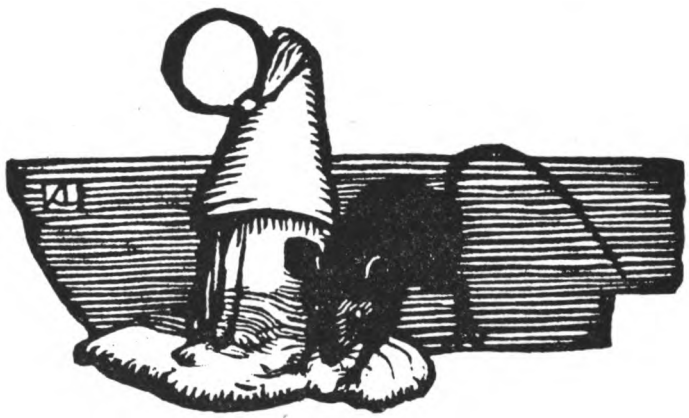
the Grolier Club, and Lewis in "Journeys to Bagdad," by Charles S. Brooks, — to emphasize again the direct harmony existing between illustrations in line and the printed text. Wood-engraving, since it is, like type-cutting, a relief-process, offers a peculiarly effective proof of this fundamental factor in book making. We see this in the books produced in the late fifteenth century in Germany, and during that brilliant period of book-illustration in Italy as that land was passing from the fifteenth century into the next. Men such as William Morris in England, Joseph Sattler in Germany, Bruce Rogers and T. M. Cleland in the United States, have in our own times clearly brought before us the necessity of considering the relation of the parts of a book to each other, leading to unity in the design of the volume. The importance of this is not too generally appreciated to-day, but wood-engraving has played its part in helping toward its realization.



WOODCUT BY A. ALLEN LEWIS

From "Journeys to Bagdad," by Charles S. Brooks
(Yale University Press, 1915)

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